

## **FILM REVIEWS**



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## Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Happy Endings a.k.a. Winter Passing (2005)	5
3. Leading Lady (2014)	11
4. King of California (2007)	17
5. Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (2005)	23
6. Steve Jobs (2015)	29
7. Conclusion	35

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## Introduction

About

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## 2 Film Reviews



A movie geek's response to the international refugee crisis.

I'm watching and reviewing my pile of unseen, impulse-bought DVDs, in what is "my kinda marathon" in aid of Refugee Action . The range of titles reviewed will be ridiculously varied, and I'll try to keep it entertaining, in an amateur film critic sort of way, but in return the refugees caught up in an international crisis and cycle of conflict need your donations.

At first, it sounds like a bit of silly idea, but I'm deadly serious about the cause. Refugees and seekers of asylum have fled war and



human rights abuses in Syria and elsewhere and are seeking safety for their families, and the basic level of certainty that we all take for granted – comfort, food, a roof over our heads, the chance live undivided from our loved ones, and to work and contribute as part of our communities.

I was aware of this as a serious humanitarian issue, despite the “spin” in the national press, but the news of the destruction of the makeshift camp in Calais where between 300 and 400 unaccompanied children are living was especially worrying and painful. I fear for these children.

As a film fan with , as it happens, a pile of impulse-bought DVDs to get through “one day”, it occurred to me that this could be my “marathon” of sorts – I could finally watch them and produce some entertaining reviews of little-seen films that are even less often reviewed or talked about in depth online. You may enjoy following my weekly progress, but I ask that you donate, mention the project to friends, and ask them to do the same.

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Possible recognised formats to acknowledge quoted work (Replace with correct article title and date published and date of your visit)

Buckley, P. M., BA, MA. (2016, April 01). King of California (2007). Retrieved April 5, 2016, from <https://moviegeekforrefugees.wordpress.com/2016/04/01/king-of-california-2007/>

#### 4 Film Reviews

Or

Buckley, Peter M., BA, MA. "King of California (2007)." *Moviegeekforrefugees*. WordPress, 01 Apr. 2016. Web. 5 Apr. 2016. <<https://moviegeekforrefugees.wordpress.com/2016/04/01/king-of-california-2007/>>.

## Happy Endings a.k.a. Winter Passing (2005)

**Stars:** Will Ferrell, Zooey Deschanel, Ed Harris

**Director:** Adam Rapp

My first review in my movie blogging marathon for Refugee Action. I'm doing this for refugees caught up in the current crisis, who have escaped war and are living in conditions noone should, please [DONATE HERE](#).

My progress, you ask? This is my first review and took me much longer than I thought, I may have to keep it shorter in future, but this movie deserves it.

Sitting serendipitously at the top of "Column A" of my unwatched DVD pile, is the perfect movie to start with – it's presence on the luckless tower a demonstration of the reasons why a good indie feature might stumble its way to the DVD market with the "help" of a distributor completely unsympathetic to the nature of the film or its many qualities. It wears a dumb, poorly-conceived cover sleeve that Photoshops the life out of Will Ferrell and Zooey Deschanel's performances on-screen. One wonders if the actors couldn't make the cover shoot and Madam Tussaud's statues were hired in their place.

This is my copy's horrible, horrible cover design, next to its self-evidently superior original poster:

WILL **FERRELL** ZOOEY **DESCHANEL** AND ED **HARRIS**

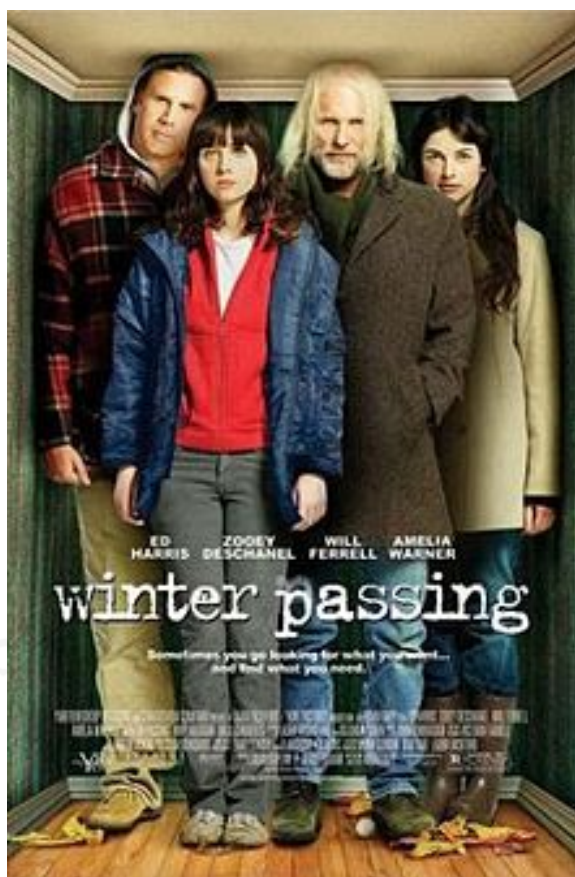


# HAPPY ENDINGS



WAS IT GOOD FOR YOU?





The new marketing hook tells us nothing of the film inside, shoehorns it into a genre to which it doesn't belong (Did you, like me, get "rom-com"? It's not) and saddles it with an unwieldy and cliché new title. Of course, after the subterfuge, I am the last in line to underestimate, mislabel and then overlook a film that has been made in honesty and sincerity. This happens in the DVD market all the time.

“Happy Endings” started life as “Winter Passing” which was more fitting for a film that is a melancholy, snowbound drama of healing family relations and the unconventional friendships that spring up in their absence.

## 8 Film Reviews

We're in New York, so we get some nice hustle-and-bustle city scenes with streetwise indie-and-shaky grit. It's always nice to see any take on The Big Apple when you're in England and especially when some real NY life is captured. They'll be an English character along later, anyhow. A portrait of homelessness and those who have fallen through the cracks is alluded to as we meet Reese (Zooey Deschanel), who makes ends meet in a bar but her real passion lies as a theatre actor, on her way to an audition. She gives a charmingly naive rendition of "My Bonnie lies over the ocean", betraying an openness we don't see in her disengaged everyday life. The theatre dressing-room camaraderie rings true. Off-stage, we're back to her small flat, drug connections, and joyless sex – one such scene played out as we learn that her cat Spike is diagnosed with feline Leukaemia.

The kitten is a lovely *ickle, ickle* ginger ball of fluff, by the way (take note for our spin-off movie feline actor review) and stands as another example of the movieland cat as a symbol of dysfunctional, disorderly lives of single or solitary, always young, characters. This is essentially a downer take on Breakfast at Tiffany's Holly and her (also marmalade) cat called "Cat", which also has odd coincidental echoes in the cat that represents the lack of human connection in Llewelyn Davis' life in the Coen brothers' 60s folk tale. In each of these cases, the protagonist has another way to try to bridge the gap. Respectively, these characters take to losing themselves in meaningless, wildfire parties, music, or for Reese, self-harm, and the manner she does so comes as a short, sharp shock, deeply sad and apt for the theme of domestic trappings that will come to light later on.

A book editor visits Reese's bar enquiring after letters left to her by her late mother – correspondence between her parents, both great authors. With the promise of a substantial sum in return, Reese reluctantly agrees to leave for mid-winter Detroit to retrieve the letters. Zooey Deschanel's performance is superb. I hated 500 Days of Summer, a twee cheese-grater of a film made by and for a self-satisfaction of hipsters (that is the collective noun for hipsters), in which a character's actual job is writing greeting card sentiments (And he HATES IT, because it's *so corporate* and *tiring*). I could go on for a whole post about how much I hate that film, but I won't. The point

is this is the absolute polar opposite counterpoint of the Deschanel's "character" of unintimidating-to-males oversimplified duotone, A4 pin-up poster Summer in that reprehensible film. Here, Reese is sufficiently troubled and exhausted, looking hopelessly out of the window of the Greyhound bus, and the film, finally, is one that allows Deschanel to express all that on her face uninhibited – despairing, confused, tormented and listless. In one of many little details, a nun, perceiving this store of unspoken pain, asks if she's all right. I was worried this character could be as much of a contrivance as Summer, in some way reflecting the Hollywood pre-set of "telling a darker story" that is more of a late 2000s mainstream thing, but that is not the case. It works and is, in the main, justified and logical for the character.

She came for the letters, but what she finds is a home very different to the one she grew in. Her father Don (Ed Harris) is living in the garage and the house given over to his ragtag bunch of friends, Don's English former student Shelly (Amelia Warner) and socially awkward Christian rock musician, Corbett (Will Ferrell). Will Ferrell is a marvel in this non-comedic role, as he was to bring a lot to the table dramatically in 2010's *Everything Must Go*. Implacably different, he speaks in non sequiturs that hang in the air ("I have to rock") in sweet and earnest attempts to connect.

Rooms are not rooms in this house, just as its answer to family life is deeply unconventional. You sense how out of place Reese feels, because that's what the film's odd tone is doing to us. Bedroom furniture has been moved outside to accommodate bizarre goings-on, and I couldn't decide if this was a step too far in portraying how the sense of normal has shifted since Reese left, but it certainly does that, and works in a film that is often more poetic than literal.

Don is physically crippled by depression, hunched, and lost amid the stuff hoarded in the garage. He only comes into the house for the "family" meal, and it's interesting that such an apparently disparate group make a routine of this gathering. Don and Reese Holden have much work to do in terms of repairing their relationship, ruptures that can be traced back to mother own struggles in their strife-stricken family. In contrast to the coolness of the Holdens that prompted Reese to leave, we perceive great warmth between Don's new tribe. The

## 10 Film Reviews

writing is clever in leading us to the same conclusions that effective newcomer Reese makes about them. Thanks greatly to Will Ferrell's performance, we root for Corbett's every success.

It's a moving film.

Oh, and I always have a soft spot for films about writers. There are little nuggets of nice dialogue about the creative process, but it's not anything like (personal favourite) *Starting Out in the Evening*, not least because Don has retired from the craft. While the script isn't one I'd describe as "sparky" in that screwball sense, it *has* spark, and the emotional intelligence required.

The film seems in a hurry to wrap up once Reese returns to New York, and we never really get to know the man Reese then appears to make more of a commitment to beyond the casual sex of before (the unacceptability of casual sex up there with the cat-owning requirement, or not, of necessarily dysfunctional young, single, unattached lives in the movies? Not to lump all this cultural baggage on a specific writer – it may still be applicable to the truth of a character – but we're all responsible for thinking about such tropes before we propagate them again.)



## Leading Lady (2014)

**Challenge Update:** The key idea of the challenge is to watch whatever comes up next in the two-column-strong pile of unwatched DVDs in my living room. I'd like to graciously state I am learning a lot I wouldn't have without the marathon, forcing me into viewing variety, researching things I don't understand, and at least trying to process things I can't research. This film specifically had typing write till 1am, feel confused and demoralised, ask for help, and be ready to be wrong, totally wrong. One fierce writer's work ethic kicking into the mix too means the "one review a day" idea I had for the original challenge may have to be bent into a different shape. I'll get back on track with regular updates and do my best. Please, please, still donate.

**Stars:** Katie McGrath, Bok van Blerk, Gil Bellows **Director:** Henk Pretorius

## 12 Film Reviews



Day 2 of my charity marathon designed to raise money for Refugee Action, while encouraging me to finally review titles in my DVD collection, was Mother's Day, so Mum chose Column B of the imposing Byzantine structure, and a recent entry, since we're still at the top, which I'm at pains to say because it was a gift from some friends living in South Africa. This is a film with all the narrative beats of the rom-com genre locked-in and by-the-book, with local details setting it apart. It's a UK-SA co-production that can still be called a local project.

Everyone will be familiar by now with a London established in fast motion footage for effect, which is fine here and there. In this film, almost every shot of the city is sped up. Business people zip buy as if on a Scalextric track. Full size RC speedboats whiz down the Thames. Every time. In South Africa, there is clearly more footage to be used. People and the odd zebra demonstrate a more relaxed pace of life by moving at a normal speed, a simplistic cinematic comparison.

Places are, generally speaking, communicated through confirmation of images viewers will already have in their minds, but the town of Brandfort is treated to more detail.

Watching this today, it's story of budding English actress Jodi (Kate McGrath) who wants to play an Afrikaans boer woman (a farmer,

in wider definition inclusive of love for God and homeland) and war hero pre-empt current and vitally important debate about casting and race in an #OscarsSoWhite climate. I'm reminded of Rooney Mara's recent admission of regret at her involvement playing Tiger Lily in *Pan*.

A fellow actor competing for the role, bumping into Jodi at the audition, quite rightly expresses her surprise at a British lady in dogged pursuit of the chance to play an Afrikaner when of course Britain was the invading colonial force. Tellingly, she continues going after the part. If the film was inclined to bite, and run with this thought, it could have had a fascinating dark comedy on its hands. I'd like a romcom about race insensitivity and casting whitewash if some genius could pull it off. How odd, and ripe for a coherent touch of satire, it is that when she is asked by the film's director, her partner and ludicrous stereotype of a Hollywood helmer, why she wants the part so much, her only answer is some triteness about wanting to getting away from London and Big Ben's chimes being an (excruciatingly stretched) metaphor for the march of time. Big metaphorical bells toll at key moments of London narrative. They appear to be reason enough to make racially-contentious career moves undeterred, and to be fair there may be an uncomfortable kernel of truth to be satirically mined here.

Dialogue is a problem. I'm afraid there are first draft level stinkers here. I'd reserve comment if it's a second-language issue but...Jodi offers a toast to director Daniel Taylor "To your Taylor-made life!" which I'd argue should have sounded just as suspect to anyone, the English and Irish actors included, and quashable on reading with fresh eyes. Romcom baddie (and arrogant slime) for contrast when the hunk comes along, Taylor holds a press interview flanked by stocking clad near-burlesque glamour girls, an opening scene so divorced from reality I thought it was a dream sequence.

Here's a general point about rom-com pitfalls, certainly not directed at this work alone – if the narrative demands that the female hero is in love with partner A, we need to see something of what attracted her to him initially, even if genre must make short shrift of him. When partner A is a wildly successful auteur director, don't we

## 14 Film Reviews

need to see someone who people would actually want to work with? And what's so great about these rules, romcom audience? What exactly is romantic about protagonists mechanically sleepwalking through these generic codas, which they do in so many films? Isn't life more messy? Is this what love feels like? It's nothing to do with love, genre is king, as long as everything is in place. She can't find arrogant slime A actually still has charm, they can't both just drift apart and never quite know why.

And she has to go to South Africa for research, where we shift into perfectly pleasant fish-out-of-water mode. The film gets more comfortable in what feels like its terrain and stretches of Afrikaans language, Jodi amusingly mistaken for a mail-order Russian bride after a bit of farmhand rough, and arriving at Boer Kobus Willemse's (Bok Van Blerk) family farm, seizing the opportunity for a perplexing selfie with a sheep. We meet Kobus' broadly funny womanising brother, Johan, and his slacker brother who considers himself sophisticated for gulping down wine, and the matriarch Magdaleen Willemse. Together they try to keep the farm afloat after crops have failed. Intent on keeping up appearances, Magdaleen insists on continuing the tradition of the town's annual Vredevei concert funded by the famed Willemse family. Seeking an opportunity to practice her script, Jodi decides to put on her script as a play for the community, in which everyone has time to shine, as is the solemn duty of any fish gradually acclimatised to new waters. It goes a bit Nativity! Without the "Kids Say The Funniest Things" first hour and of more interest than the "other peoples' kid's Christmas play" last half hour. Of the Nativity! Films. Which I can't stand, myself.

This play allows for a genuinely entertaining audition montage, that really isn't like every other you've seen, highly YouTube-able, and played for laughs, but also showcasing real talent of acting, hip-hop and dance.

Though it is only a part of the whole film, the play about a woman who died for love in horrific times manages to be stark enough for impact, but is more to show everyone coming together to produce it.

Rehearsal involves preparations that were deeply odd to this viewer. A white family with a black maid can't help but set off the

personally-customised liberal alarm bells that have stood me well, knowing the little I do, as an outsider, of South Africa's history. As a viewer, I'm finely attuned and wary of power or wealth imbalance in anything, and though this family get along fine, mutually respectful and all that, and though this script is not clever enough for social-economic comment necessary for change, my own big metaphorical bells will ring, very much London-based I'm sure. And even if there are more than one million women who work as maids, and it is normalised, "Six years after the end of apartheid, the daily lives of many domestic workers, have changed little" and "almost all", says this article, are black women. So it's odd when the family maid, out of humility, declines a part in the play, and Jodi's response is to instruct her white choir ladies to "remember you're not white, you're black". What follows is a scene in which the choir watch the maid at work in order to imitate her working routine. But it's all right (is it? Is it really?) because she spots the covert troupe, and hands them the broom to complete the chores, so roles are reversed and the film deems the situation diffused. There's a "what the hell?" factor here, which many viewers in the country will get too, the film saw fit to backtrack, after all. The film has very little critical sense of itself.

You have all the fun there is to have. As a jet-setting co-production, there's a fair amount in Brandfort with a nice clique of characters, and none in sped-up, silhouetted then neon then bing-bonging London. Jodi and Kobus and community are united over the play and his song writing and suddenly an arrogant, pampered, and phoney director doesn't seem so appealing.

The ending movements, though, have pathos. They aren't conventional, and play out with heart. But there *is* a wedding to be interrupted at last minute. There are plenty of local jokes that I recognised as such and raised a smile but will be more resonant to local viewers.



## King of California (2007)

Director: Mike Cahill Starring: Michael Douglas, Evan Rachel Wood



This is a very charming and beautifully-weaved story, at least in part about the pressures of poverty and getting by, which teenage Miranda (Evan Rachel Wood) has done, living alone in her mother's house from a young age, escaping the Social Services radar due to bureaucratic oversight. She has "always been the responsible party", and as her father (Michael Douglas) is discharged from a mental health facility, her quiet

## 18 Film Reviews

solitary life again disrupted by a duty of care to her troubled, eccentric ex-jazz musician Dad, Charlie.

I've had frequent cause to be disappointed with Hollywood depictions of mental health and related issues, which all too often reflect not an informed stance but the great ignorance there still exists within our wider culture.

By way of illustration, Jonathan Demme is a director who has twice impressed me in creating depictions of depression which ring true, to me at least, in "Rachel Getting Married" and later "Ricki and the Flash". He is one of very few mainstream filmmakers able to connect with the languid hopelessness of the experience by investing more patience than most for suffering protagonists. He gets close to what would be best for fidelity to the experience, having characters who might feel crappy often for no reason that is logical to the progression of a mainstream screenplay. Those two films make other treatments of mental illness on screen – like "The Silver Linings Playbook" – frankly, hamfisted and by extension morally questionable. They reach for big gestures that are not often the truth of depressed discontent in the real world. Screenwriters, perhaps not entirely trusting their audience and with the pressure to create drama, think they have to signpost crisis but do so in an overblown way; (a) to be sure we get the message and (b) inescapably and most worryingly for our entertainment.

Demme, meanwhile, is interested in supporting the actors in showing smaller things on their faces and in their performances, so you feel their struggle. They don't need to present a danger to others, beat anyone up to the point of attempted murder, or be triggered by Stevie Wonder into aggression, in the manner of stage hypnosis myth, as in "Silver Linings Playbook", a film lifted by great performances, but weakened by irresponsible regurgitation of mental health misinformation. The Hollywood and mainstream indie cause-and-explosive-effect approach is unfortunately seen as more likely to add momentum to a crowd-pleasing screenplay.

While we're talking about screenplay momentum, this film capitalises on that time honoured theme of determination in pursuing a seemingly impossible dream, and the cross-over between that and



unhelpful delusions that carry risk of harm to oneself and those one loves. Think “Don Quixote”, or no doubt even earlier, to trace the origin of this narrative tradition.

While otherwise encumbered, Charlie has spent his time researching diary evidence of an ancient cache of gold buried by Spanish explorer Father Torres, which further evidence seems to confirm. Miranda is a hesitant accomplice, firmly rooted in a stable existence in Charlie’s absence that doesn’t reap much in the way of gold doubloons nor accommodate much room for flights of fancy. However, she goes along with the treasure hunt out of pressing financial necessity and also as an extension of her sense of responsibility toward Charlie, even though her patience is tested.

How wonderfully refreshing it is, incidentally, to watch a film with a young person who is not a unproductive, consumerist slacker, but has agency to propel the story, and provide it’s voice of reason. I do like the odd meandering slacker film with characters that float like smoke from one unlikely scrape to another, with explicit or implied voices somewhere telling them to “get a job”, but jeezus isn’t it nice to see a young person who has it sorted themselves without even being told to. Cinema’s depiction of generation gaps has tended toward the distinctly fuddy-duddy as a whole, making the teen films of John Hughes shining examples of mutual generational understanding, together with Nicholas Ray’s “Rebel Without a Cause”, with it’s vision retrospectively interested in gay identity – films made by two people in different times who had a very sympathetic outsider’s outlook, who had not forgotten the difficulty of forming one’s identity because the struggle, one senses, never left them in adulthood, and they were artists who also who did not need to manufacture a sense of rebellion, it’s real, within it a palpable shot of pain, and it pops off the screen in each case, forming the films around it.

“King of California” numbers Alexander Payne (“Sideways”, “The Descendants”) as a producer of the film written and directed by American Zoetrope Screenplay Contest 2004 winner Mike Cahill. I don’t know if he’s gone on to do any other films – IMDB lists no subsequent work – but with a talent like his, he should. If you read comments below that spare profile, and that of the film, you’ll note that

## 20 Film Reviews

it is greatly admired. I doubt we can call that cult appeal just yet, but to count admirers of this gem would be to play an unseemly numbers game anyway. This is a wonderful film. Seek it out. We may even get it a bigger cult, as if great works need a quantifiable worshipful audience for validation. Sadly, in the film industry, they kinda do, from a certain standpoint.

By happy coincidence or indefinable symbiosis the film seems to share the eye for family dynamics and human melancholy that I associate with Alexander Payne.

There's something else that is delightful at play here – the film seems to get maniacally genius mileage from what in other films would, with negative connotations, be termed “product placement”. The Spanish monk's treasure, dating back to 1624, is found below wholesale shop Costco, piled high with recognisable products. On the way there, the landscape is a deliberately uninspiring sprawl of known fast food restaurants, and prefab cookie-cutter buildings (possibly made of “ticky tacky”; a second viewing is required). In contrast Miranda and Charlie's house where the free jazz spirit plays his bass on the porch has warmth and oodles of character. Ultimately their quest is to find a little bit of magic, whether in the middle of a golf course or outside a giant pet store, with a recognisable golden “M” in the distance. In locations such as this, you understand their need to follow the trail of a legend from the unexplainable depths of history, a time of devoted holy men on long arduous pilgrimage, vision quests, and journeys that end in real pots of gold. Little or no real sense of community depicted save for queasily and symptomatically dysfunctional pockets of weirdness from which loneliness is only amplified.

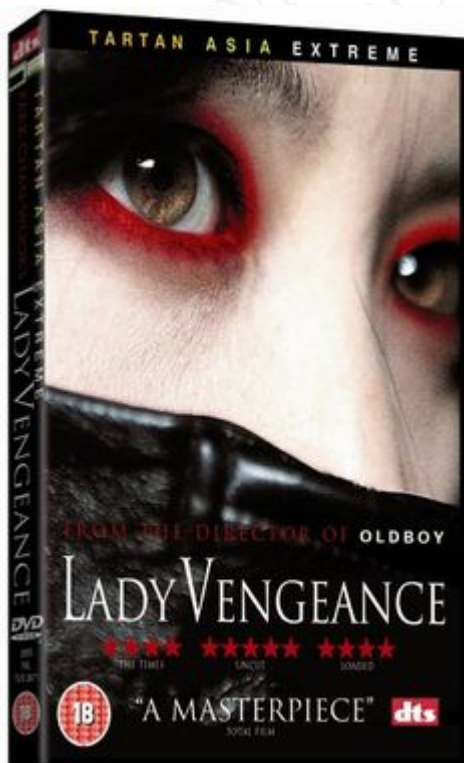
Charlie's heist, with a deft lightness of touch, shows a number of Costco-stocked lines used, amusingly, for nefarious purposes, and the escapade is satisfyingly, even masterfully, handled. A sense of magic is restored while the very things charged with sucking it dry presumably finance the film (or not?) in an integrated, agreeable way you readily accept as a viewer, gripped and emotionally connected with the story. You'll enjoy spending time with Charlie and Miranda. To echo my earlier thoughts, representations of mental health and, perhaps, the youth of the American working class are tuned to be entertaining, but

feel harmless and pack a payload of heart. Charlie sees “this land filled”, once again, “with madness”, the madness largely being hope and the audacity to dream and, beyond that, seek truth, in a bland service-industry littered non-place.



## Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (2005)

Director: Park Chan-Wook Starring: Yeong-ae Lee, Min-sik Choi, Shi-hoo Kim



Even as a fan of Park Chan-Wook's *Oldboy*, I picked up this DVD recently (it's sad to see a notable contemporary work of art cinema going for £1 at a garden centre) with scaredy-cat trepidation,

## 24 Film Reviews

expecting something that would once again challenge me as a viewer with confrontational ultraviolence and acts of unspeakable evil, lifted and stirred up into dizzying moral complexity by the dark mischief of Chan-wook's directorial comment on the horrors.

Since my uni days when I was obliged to watch and engage all sorts of films, my personal tastes have settled into a natural preference for less nerve-shredding or jump-making work, and generally towards mainstream and world cinema that we can watch as a family without much cause for anyone to ask "what the hell are we watching?" I'm exaggerating – that's often the unspoken sentiment even my "mellow" choices invite, but the understanding that this was a "review challenge" film that escaped immediate viewing was confirmed early. I loved it, though this difficult, feral tale of life in a women's prison and subsequent, relentlessly furious, revenge makes a philosophical prerogative out of challenging and complicating the generally accepted association of narrative film, and even screen violence, with enjoyment.

In fact there's lots to enjoy here, with the film's mutant gene delivering it's brutal twists of fate through a counter-influence that, would you know it, is a lot like sweetness. A sweet narrating voice-over recalling the story of Ms. Geum-Ja Lee (Yeong-ae Lee), known throughout the facility of her incarceration as "The Kind-Hearted", make this, viewed from a certain bizarre angle, seem to me in it's early movements as the evil twin of Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie*. Only just!

It's some feat that you find sympathy for Geum-Ja, who is stained irredeemably in the film's monstrous wake of evil, but is not entirely undeserving of redemption, which is tasted, hinted at, but it is futile to ask for more than that in Geum-Ja's world. To eek out sweetness and an underdog mentality from this tale is Chan-wook's devious trap for the audience, in keeping with his investigation of morality, and as enjoyable as it is after cinematic slaughter to take the bait of catharsis that "revenge movie" genre allusions provide, it comes with a dark sting of guilt for the audience to chew on.

The "kind hearted" Ms Geum-Ja's deeds while incarcerated help others as she makes crafty work of dispatching bullies, but add ever greater layers of irony to her name. She decides "prison is a good

place to learn how to pray”, soon so pious that her face is known to literally glow. Hallucinations and reality are one, and serve to critique Christianity’s stated path to redemption – which the film’s reality suggests is naive when wading in the putrescence of pure evil – while also marking sites of cultural contention between Christianity and Buddhism in this story from Korea, a country whose religious plurality encompasses a (roughly) equal number of followers from these religions. The instrument of Ms Geum-Ja’s bloody revenge is a beautiful ancient short-range firearm, the plans for the construction of which is illustrated on an old Buddhist text from a veteran of the prison.

“Prayer is like a scrubbing towel” says Ms Geum-Ja, who assisted in the kidnapping of six-year-old boy, Park Won-mo, and took the blame for his murder at the hands of warped, demonic school teacher Mr. Baek (Min-shik Choi), who kidnapped her daughter as blackmail. Striking scenes of media frenzy state how the young Ms Geum-Ja, grotesquely, started a fashion trend, and we see, in images I won’t manage to forget in a while, Geum-Ja reenacting the crime she is said to have committed, with something like a shop dummy, whose head comes off in the crush of photographers poised to capture the newsworthy moment.

Geum-Ja’s story is, with incredible skill, weaved with the stories of the other female inmates. There’s a sense of institutionalised community, if only because they share the same space, which is not to suggest for a minute that it could ever be functional. It’s an uncaring space in which anything can happen, guards rarely seen and we assume, don’t care. It’s a place where the flaws of (irredeemably broken) individuals are left to fester between sickly pink walls. We see the name of the inmate, the length of their sentence, and inevitably, how they are helped or get what is coming to them in a double-edged brutal sort of way. There’s a gallows humour brand of camp, I’d say, to the prison scenes. What you embrace yourself for going in is not off kilter dark comedy, but before the tone switches entirely, that is what you get.

The film’s sense of character is admirable, and seems to have that element praised in Almodóvar’s work, a respect for complexity in female characters. Park Chan-Wook is similarly incapable of not giving his female protagonists characters, not sentimentally idealised

## 26 Film Reviews

wilting goddess-creations, but real people. That sensibility gives us moments like one in which Ms Geum-Ja donates a kidney to inmate Woo So-Young, who repeatedly insults and intimidates her. We can perceive sisterly respect, in the feminist sense, even though, make no mistake, most everyone is awful and the film asks us to choose whether or not to delight in the varying degrees of that, and examine how we do so.

To play that comparison game again, “Lady Vengeance” seemed to me to have that decadent approach to design of interiors that recalls to me an obscure indirectly attributable echo of ideas of high-style in 70’s Britain, and of *A Clockwork Orange* – expressions of style made to cover cracks, obscene style amid recessions of spirit and empathy, economic too, of course, in Kubrick’s film. Geum-Ja stays at an inmate friend’s hair salon, with elaborate wallpaper, 1950s theatre dressing room lightbulbs and a number of mirrors, an over-extension of effort that begs the question what it is compensating for, what sense of style a sinner deserves and appropriates, and whether aesthetics can sooth or take the place of attempts to heal. To me, the salon could reside next to The Korova Milk Bar. There’s sense throughout the film of classical beauty and traditional melodrama staging, that you’ll find in *Vengeance*, at the cutting edge of bleeding, tragic chaos.

In this space, and by Geum-Ja, Geun-shik (Shi-hoo Kim), a sexually inexperienced young man, seems to be swallowed. He seems like one of the few “good” men of the piece, though his aspirations of marrying and settling down with a “good” woman, that is to say his quaint, charming moral code, seem easily modified by his fascination with Geum-Ja and the prospect of sex with her, which is an early if not virginal experience for Geun-shik, and one that Ms Geum-Ja seems disinterested in. Symptomatic, I wondered, as we can be fairly sure of a history of sexual abuse by Mr. Baek.

A rape scene with Mr. Baek and former prisoner Park Yi-jeong (Seung-shin Lee) which takes place at a domestic dinner table, food still laid out and barely eaten, is an example again of Park Chan-Wook’s directorial obsession with eating – again finding a protracted disgust and anxiety in the act that we saw in the now infamous octopus eating scene in 2003’s *Oldboy*. Food, the manner in which it is eaten, and the



utter perversion of eating rituals, give rise to the expression of all evils, fury, and inner torment. Time set aside for eating becomes lawless. On the other hand, however, the symbolic white tofu handed out to prisoners upon release, as a reminder to live as purely as snow, becomes a symbol of hope and redemption, bogus when offered by the prison's corrupt chaplain, but something that Ms. Geum-Ja sinks her face into when her closest approximation of redemption is achieved.

Guen-shik, Geum-Ja and daughter Jenny form a kind of family. More of one than Jenny found with adoptive Australian parents. However Jenny doesn't speak Korean. Held captive and at gunpoint, Mr. Baek translates a heartfelt message to Jenny from her mother, and this interplay the film has with languages, flicking through dictionaries to translate all-important messages, expressed in heartbreakingly simple, childlike ways to and from a child's point of understanding, is beautiful, and great use is made to this end of incongruous voices reading out translated text. Park Chan-Wook might have one eye on English-speaking audiences when Guen-shik teaches Jenny Korean words in the schoolhouse where the film's final, bloody act of collective revenge is to take place. We notice the similarity between the Korean words for "brother" and "father", with the connotation that Guen-shik is to be both.

In a gentle way, "Lady Vengeance" presents a vision of "world cinema" that breaks free from that as a designated label forced on it by others, presenting instead a cinema of international solidarity, which is defined with self-agency. This seems to process globalised inevitability, and a joy in other languages, used for pure and positive communication in the worst of times, to a child.

Ms Geum-Ja's 13-year plan to gain redemption and closure, for her and the parents of children Mr. Baek kidnapped and murdered, sees those gathered in the classroom wailing and crying as they view every one of the hostage tapes that detectives did not seek, under the belief they had found their culprit in Ms. Geum-Ja. These are appropriately pitiful scenes, arduous to watch.

The film's interrogation of the nature of justice turns to literal discussion here, as Ms. Geum-Ja, the avenging angel, is even-handed in giving the parents the option of justice by official or vigilantist

methods. The latter chosen, they discuss the obscene formality and structure by which they can each enter the room where Mr. Baek is bound, to deliver personalised retribution.

A food ritual is again an anchor for the film's simultaneously contradictory and ever-complex emotional register. The victim's families gather after the act to share a blood-red cake for what feels "like a birthday", candle smoke rises, a hushed calm descends, peace is sensed for the first time. It begins to snow, to the surprise of this new family, forged by shared pain.

## Steve Jobs (2015)

This is a charity fundraising challenge for Refugee Action. If you appreciate this review please donate what you can on my justgiving page.



Directed by: Danny Boyle

Starring Micheal Fassbender, Kate Winslet, Seth Rogan

Presenters of the Oscars for original screenplay remind us each year that every film starts with the written word, before even a single shot is filmed yada yada. Chances are if you're watching you'll know that and may even know of a few directors who start with a bare-bones foundation or none at all, rare though that is. Critics well know the

## 30 Film Reviews

form's start as text too, but have at times had to juggle that with the idea of a director as definitive author of a collaborative product, i.e the so-called "auteur theory" that is a founding stone of film education and still holds some sway, for better or worse, with degrees of value from discussion to discussion.

It doesn't take much to trigger a general reassessment of this theory, and this occurs when a screenwriter has such a forcefully individualistic way with dialogue and theme that the sense of collaboration – true of all films – is made more transparent. In a way this does an injustice to other screenwriters, who are just as skilled, but are not treated to critical attention in the assessment of their shared efforts. At least it's a step toward celebrating writers more than wheeled-out platitudes could. With the excellent biopic of screenwriter Dalton Trumbo recently in cinemas, it seems right to amend an increasingly creaky theory with industry-minded complications that put writers back in the frame.

The gradual shift has been marked by the rise to prominence of screenwriters Charlie Kaufman (*Being John Malkovich*) and Aaron Sorkin, the latter of whom co-pilots the Danny Boyle directed "Steve Jobs". This is by virtue of Sorkin's ear for micro-politics in high-pressure environments, subtle transformations of interpersonal relationships, witty retorts and human flaws. Of course, the appropriate comparison is *The Social Network*; Sorkin proving that he knows how to find drama in the connected world and the lives of its architects, writing rattle-gun in their evolved language, but in an accessible way. Sorkin's found a nice niche for himself through being unafraid of technology. Generally in Hollywood technology means special effects but it still seems odd when characters don't text, check Facebook daily, or meet via a dating website.

Sorkin has a skill for processing the criticisms leveled at a company for raw material. He suggests that this starts with founders, as a dramatic device. We'll never know if there is any truth to this, and since this review isn't going to pass any comment on real people, I'd argue that what this does as a fictional device is set up a contemporary version of a Shakespearian power hierarchy and imbalance, just the thing for verbal sparring, tragedy and exposure of the ego that sparks

creativity and makes fortunes through great force of will. Steve Job's trajectory from visionary head of his company, to his being fired, to being restored to the position at which he started, must be quite unprecedented and is a royal, Globe Theatre-worthy tale of struggle.

"The Social Network" was as much about Mark Zuckerberg (fictionalised) as it was our fears about the creepiness of the data-mining social platform. "Steve Jobs" has, subtly within its biopic fabric, Apple's belief in "closed" computer systems, with limited customisation options, which relinquished the power of tech-savvy hobbyists to decide their own set-up, and asked its newly defined consumers to trade this right for ease of use, and implicitly accept a steady flow of new officially-sanctioned models. In the Mexican waves of early computer convention audiences, and later talk of death threats to CEO John Sculley (Jeff Daniels), we see hints of the cult mentality sometimes associated with the company's most die-hard fans.

The story is about Steve Jobs ushering Apple into its unique place as a design, marketing, and computer company, with support or detraction from its iconic 1984-themed commercial for the Macintosh just one dividing line between those on board with Jobs' big-screen thinking and the old guard of the traditional salesman's pitch. The other cause of detraction comes from Job's closest friend Steve Wozniak (Seth Rogan) who has been by Job's side since they laboured and made computer history in a shed, but grows increasingly at odds with his self-styled orchestrating role, which as the film has it, requires Steve Jobs the icon to play his role as visionary, becoming increasingly disassociated from the coal face of the engineering effort required to realise his designs (and inextricably, innovation in market concepts). The film opens with Steve Jobs insisting that the Apple Macintosh greet convention audiences with a "hello", a technological milestone then seen as near-impossible. The synthesised "hello" would mark the Macintosh out from the crowd, a marketing coup that would symbolise Job's tireless goal of access for all to computing through clever design – the ideal that more and more people could unlock their potential through computers. The means towards this admirable end are what the film takes pause to implicitly question, the "hello" temporarily faked for the demo to the awaiting crowd.

## 32 Film Reviews

Structuring the screenplay around product launches is a decision that effectively makes this akin to a 30s backstage musical, by which I mean tension is derived from preparations for the big show, the long-festering personal gripes that burst through in the pressure-cooker make-or-break atmosphere, and the anticipation for it to make the history that now is written.

In this structure, there's something missed, an insight I felt it could have offered. As a fan of the AMC/Amazon-streamed series "Halt and Catch Fire", I would have lapped up insight into that shed so formative to Jobs and Wozniak – workshoppy things about overcoming technological obstacles with limited hardware. Given the choice, the moment of invention has a greater draw for me than the presentation of product. A little scene we get of Jobs and Woz arguing in the shed is so tantalising. The screenplay is blessed with laser-like focus, but couldn't we have had more "making" as well as showing? I love that stuff.

Absent too, is the industrial espionage intrigue and warlike rivalry known to have been a part of the early days of computing, as seen in Martyn Burke's "Pirates of Silicon Valley". As I understand it, I don't know where this fits on the general timeline, but many fledgling computer companies fell victim to the over-crowded market of brands jostling for shelf life, whereas this is a victors' film that doesn't seem threatened enough by failure. We know Steve Jobs must have been, we get that through dialogue, but the film doesn't entertain the feel of that threat as much.

A fond fascination I have for this time, just before my own computing days, can be put down to the number of British computing brands there were, and I believe there was a Clive Sinclair TV biopic ("Micro Men") but more Brit microcomputer backstories would be welcome, or indeed any tales of people striking out into this brave frontier, especially if it shows the creative processes, decisions, and act of making something. My point is the production and tone-control of 'Steve Jobs' is as polished as the visionary man's designs, lacking the frustration that creating something entails. I'm thinking of documentary "Indie Game: The Movie"'s developers cursing at screens as they try to breathing life to heartfelt visions on unco-operative app

stores, and toil night and day at their computers. If you've seen that, remember the opening scene? That was gripping. Because 'Jobs' is so sleek and so focussed on the figurehead, we don't get much like that to get between our teeth like a chewtoy, to share in the emotionally charged vision.

The complicated relationship between Steve Jobs and his daughter, Lisa and his denial of her, is skillfully handled by the film, and the apparent thawing of it sweet, after what is well-scripted, symbolic of another side to Job's personality, infuriating to those around him, and inexplicable and perplexing, even to the film, rightly so, as we are film makers and film watchers, and some things will only be known only to the real-life players. You can and will react powerfully to it.

Danny Boyle hasn't got the chaotic vibrancy of club culture or of India to bounce of and whizz about, there's no heady musical rhythms, and few cues for fast cutting. He lets the story tell itself without as many of the interventions we're accustomed to from him, and he deliberately lets Sorkin's script speak. You'll notice nods to Boyle's beloved Nic Roeg in his subliminal-duration flashbacks to Lisa, visual innovation in the Skylab rocket projected behind Steve Jobs as he espouses it's exploratory ideals, and a lovely documentary style montage sequence belting through Sculley's failure in Job's absence with the touch screen organiser, the Newton. The cheeky, pop culturally astute Danny Boyle makes use of a great Simpson's gag at the expense of the device's laughable shortcomings. In fact, this pop-doc angle on the period would seem a great a simplification of the reasons for Sculley's exit, but it works. No doubt a lot is simplified and compressed, but it's seamed together beautifully, with sensitive choices complimenting the father-daughter through line sensitively, too.

You don't always need to see the direction written as starkly as a Banksy. The take-away is that it works, screenplay, performances (just to be perverse it's taken me this long to mention Micheal Fassbender as Jobs, excellent, as is Kate Winslet, playing Joanna Hoffman, his guide in social sensitivity) and shoot combined. It isn't the film I'm quite waiting for, but it's great.





## Conclusion

Note

30/12/2016

This is provided for archival purposes. It may be clear that my particular fund raising effort remains unfinished and did not meet it's stated end. It raised £35.00 for Refugee Action, and donations are still being accepted for the cause at <https://www.justgiving.com/movies> an of course, <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/> . Of course, there are many other charities and organisations helping out in the current refugee crisis who would appreciate donations or any other form of help you are able to give.

I might have helped in some very small way. The task was well-meaning but ambitious, and the few reviews presented here represent some hours work that might have some value or interest.

Thank you, and a special thanks to all who donated.

Pete